



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DECISION NOTICE for the Draft Environmental Assessment: Amelia Island Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease

Region 7 Headquarters
PO Box 1630, Miles City, MT 59301
(406) 234-0900

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

The 86 acre Amelia Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA) was purchased by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) in attempt to maintain a riparian/cropland habitat complex to benefit a diversity of wildlife while enhancing public hunting opportunities. The proposed action is to continue a share-crop agreement on 30 acres. The fields in the proposed project area have traditionally been utilized for agricultural production. The lessee will cultivate and retain a portion (75%) of the grain crop harvest, leaving the remaining crop (25%) standing for wildlife use during winter months.

The benefit and purpose of the lease is to provide winter habitat and forage, primarily for pheasants, deer, and turkeys. Standing crops also benefit migrating waterfowl and a variety of other wildlife species. The WMA is open to public hunting during all commission-approved seasons, and provides opportunity for deer, upland game bird, and waterfowl hunting.

The WMA has been under an agricultural lease with the same lessee since 1985. At this point the previous lessee is not interested in renewing the share-crop agreement. As a result, a public processed will be conducted to solicit a potential new lessee. As in the past, the lessee will be required to utilize farming practices that increase the productivity of the land. These include fertilizing and conditioning the soil, treating of noxious weeds, and maintaining fields in good condition.

ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSED ACTION:

Alternative A: No Action: Agricultural lease will not be renewed and agricultural lands will not be cultivated. This alternative would require MFWP to commit resources to manage weeds on 30 acres of previously cultivated fields. Wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of wintering habitat and food resources.

Alternative B: Proposed Action: Continue agricultural production: Agricultural lease will be established on 30 acres of farm fields. Wildlife will benefit because high-quality wintering habitat and forage will be available. The lessee(s), MFWP and sportsmen will mutually benefit through the sharecrop agreement.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS:

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Amelia Island Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease) on February 7, 2014 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on February 28, 2014.

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the draft EA was published in the *Miles City Star* and the *Forsyth Independent Press*. Copies of the environmental assessment were distributed to neighboring landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments"). An FWP statewide news release was issued and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases").

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received one public comment.

The comment was in support of the proposed management action.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

Below is a summary of comment and FWP's response.

Comment 1.

1. Small grains should be utilized to benefit wildlife. The WMA should not be used for hay production

MFWP Response: Small grains generally refer to wheat, barley, rye, and corn. Each crop type has benefits for wildlife, soil health, and weed control. The preferred crop in a given field is dictated by conditions in that field. Crops must be rotated to prevent disease and improve soil health. Legumes fix nitrogen to benefit soil fertility. Perennial food plots provide both food and cover, but may not be a good choice in areas where weed infestations are likely or areas with flood-damaged soils. Small grains may be preferred when weed control is a concern. A diversity of crop types is preferred for wildlife because none are nutritionally complete, yet all of the listed crops can provide a critical source of winter food, especially when used in combination.

Currently there are no areas of the WMA designated for hay production. Ultimately, it is MFWP intent to utilize small grains as the primary crops on the WMA

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by MFWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed action.

MFWP's analysis supports the agricultural lease of Amelia Island WMA as proposed. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the continuation of the agricultural lease for Amelia Island WMA.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: www.fwp.mt.gov or be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 7 Headquarters, P.O. Box 1630, Miles City, Mt. 59301 (406) 234-0900.



Brad R. Schmitz
R7 Regional Supervisor

March 4, 2014

Date

APPENDIX A
PUBLIC COMMENTS – AMELIA ISLAND WMA AGRICULTURAL LEASE
FEBRUARY 7 – FEBRUARY 28, 2014

Comment #	Comment
1	<p>From: garyinmt@q.com Sent: Monday, February 10, 2014 10:57 PM To: Atwood, Steve Subject: Amelia Island</p> <p>My comments here are the same as for the Seven Sisters lease proposed a few days ago. I believe you should be striving for wheat or corn crop leases on WMAs, if you are really trying to benefit birds and deer. I have had excellent pheasant hunting on Amelia during the years when corn was planted there. My experience with hay crops and birds is very poor. In the fall when you'd like a little cover to hunt birds in, it's usually just short stubble, of very little use to birds. I have been a member of a bird hunting preserve near Townsend for quite a few years where they planted mostly grain crops for a number of years. The young owner has been switching over to hay crops to support more cows he wants to raise. As the switch progressed over the years, I saw the number of birds decrease in direct proportion to the amount of hay raised. It got so bad last year (no grain or corn) that I discontinued my membership because the bird hunting was so bad. Consequently, I am in opposition to the hay lease you are proposing. Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Gary Schnicke, 2117 Kyd Rd, Three Forks, MT 59752</p>